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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ATHENS 001687

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: GREECE ABLAZE: KARAMANLIS DECLARES STATE OF
EMERGENCY

REF: A) ATHENS 1556 B) ATHENS 1518 C) ATHENS 1498 D)
ATHENS 1487

Classified By: CHARGE TOM COUNTRYMN. REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMAY: Over the weekend of August 25-26, more than a hundred simultaneous wildfires led to the worst Greek national disaster since the 1999 earthquakes. PM Karamanlis declared a state of emergency, calling on aerial firefighting resources from EU members and others. Reports indicate more than fifty dead, although to date no Americans have been reported missing. Embassy activated the warden system and temporarily vacated 3 employees from threatened housing (all have returned). GOG contacts tell us that they currently have sufficient aircraft resources on hand. However, GOG openness to other types of firefighting assistance means we plan to request USDA/OFDA funding on August 27. Other Embassy initiatives include facilitating military assistance, if requested, through EUCOM channels. Investigations into the cause of the widespread fires are underway; police suspect possible anarchist involvement in at least one incident. While the media has so far avoided promoting conspiracy theories, the political consequences for PM Karamanlis -- in the midst of a general election campaign -- are potentially high. END SUMMARY.

DEATH TOLL: 50

¶2. (SBU) On August 25, fires broke out on the island of Evia as well as in much of southern Attica -- adding to the on-going, devastating fires which had begun the day before in the Peloponnese peninsula. Gale force winds added to the difficulties firefighters faced. In the Peloponnese, the flames advanced through hard-to-access mountain terrain; TV screens showed the remains of burnt-out homes and cars. To date, 53 people are confirmed dead. Many were residents of isolated villages, although some were overtaken by the fires they were fleeing. On Evia, wildfires raged through much of the central and southern part of the island along a 30 KM front; several towns were still being evacuated on August 26.

Residents of Athens were not exempt, as fires broke out on Mount Imittos, threatening the southeast Athens suburbs. Officials temporarily closed a highway near Athens International Airport as a result.

¶4. (SBU) Embassy Athens activated its warden system on August 25. To date, no Americans are reported as missing. Duty officer received a number of phone calls from concerned Americans, but none were immediately affected. The Consulate also received phone calls, mostly from citizens concerned about access to the Athens airport. The fire on Imittos, close to the city center, threatened homes in the suburb of Papagou, where 14 Embassy residences are located. Due to the close proximity of the fire, the terrain to it has declared a state of emergency and appealed to EU members for assistance. By the morning of August 26, several countries (including some non-EU members) had sent firefighting planes, helicopters, fire engines and

firefighters. These assets will be added to the Russian firefighting aircraft already on the ground (reportedly being leased to the GOG at high rates). MFA SYG Agathocles told Charge that by August 26 the aircraft numbered 31; with that high number, the GOG had decided not to accept additional aircraft offers at this time but to manage the resources now available. He added that the GOG did not plan to request NATO assets at this time, although it might revisit the question at a later time.

16. (C) The scale of the devastation resulting from the weekend's fires makes this situation dramatically different from the more limited fires which took place at the end of July. At that time, and in consultation with GOG officials, no USAID/OFDA emergency assistance was requested (ref A); the GOG needed immediate access to firefighting aircraft rather than financial assistance. Any U.S. financial contribution at that time would likely have gone to support GOG leasing of (expensive) Russian firefighting aircraft. The scale of this weekend's crisis is dramatically different from what we experienced in July. Greece -- among the poorest of the EU countries -- has sufficient monetary resources to address this crisis over the medium term. However, it does not have in place sufficient physical resources to address emergency needs.

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17. (C) Personnel from the US Naval Base at Souda Bay have already deployed several times this summer to assist local authorities in fighting wildfires in western Crete -- without much public fanfare. The Greek press is now reporting that the GOG has accepted, for the first time, foreign firefighters and other assets to help contain the fires. MFA SYG Agathocles told Charge that the GOG would welcome any assistance the U.S. military could offer that would directly help combat the fires (i.e., not relief supplies). Agathocles noted that Minister of Economy Alogoskoufis planned to establish a fund to accept contributions, including from abroad, for fire victims and repair of damage.

18. (SBU) This new Greek openness to other types of assets and relief supplies has factored into our decision to submit a formal request for USAID/OFDA funds on August 27. As of this writing, the use to which it would be put is unclear; Embassy will pursue this point further with GOG contacts on August 27 to determine which of their immediate needs fit within OFDA's scope. In addition:

- Embassy DATT is contacting the new CHOD, and will pursue through military channels appropriate assistance from EUCOM;
- Embassy will work with the Greek-American community to coordinate voluntary contributions directed toward relief for local communities hit hard by the catastrophe as well as possible environmental remediation efforts, particularly reforestation which Agathocles identified as an immediate priority once the crisis had passed;
- In response to a request from the GOG, Embassy is planning to provide USDA-sponsored training for Greek firefighters, beginning in October. While reasonably prepared to respond to urban fires, GOG firefighters are less expert in fighting rural blazes in mountainous terrain;
- Post will work with other Embassies in the region on program proposals for longer-term regionally based firefighting support from USG civilian and military resources as well as from the U.S. private sector (such as Boeing Corp.).

WHAT STARTED THIS? INVESTIGATION UNDERWAY

19. (C) So far, the media has rejected the usual conspiracy theories of a "foreign hand" behind the flames. Nor are many suggesting domestic "terrorism" as the cause, although the mayor of Imittos claimed that an amateur video showed two men on a little used path up the hill and shots of the remnants of a gas canister bomb nearby. Thessaloniki's mayor

Psomiadis also appeared on national TV in support of the domestic terror hypothesis. However, no other rural governor or mayor has publicly supported this argument. Most of the media has focused on the possibility of arson, with some citing websites on YouTube as evidence of its popularity. Overall, the media seems to be making a conscious effort not to politicize the tragedy. Many commentators cite the incompetence of successive Greek governments, and there is some uncertainty as to how the current leadership will handle the situation. Most media are broadcasting spot reports complaining about ad hoc evacuation efforts.

¶10. (C) Police sources tell us that investigators of the Imittos blaze found remote detonating devices similar to those typically used by anarchist/terrorist organizations like Revolutionary Struggle to set off small bombs in urban settings. No further details have been made available, and this information has not been made public. The GOG is aggressively pursuing the arsonists; Karamanlis planned to spend August 26 at the Ministry of Public Order. The Hellenic Police's counter-terrorism unit is also investigating.

¶11. (C) Certainly, dry conditions and high winds created the perfect conditions for fires to spread. But while some may have been sparked by accidental carelessness, the sheer number of individual fires leads us to agree with Karamanlis's own assessment: that so many fires breaking out simultaneously in so many parts of the country cannot be a coincidence. Most Greeks know that developers routinely build -- illegally but permanently -- on areas "cleared" by natural disasters. But the Imittos evidence also points to an additional anarchist/political element in the mix.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES COULD BE HIGH

¶12. (C) PM Karamanlis took a calculated risk when he started the 30 day electoral calendar running in mid-August. His gamble: that elections on September 16 would limit his vulnerability to criticism over last spring's structured bond scandal and his handling of the July fires. Not surprisingly, rumors are already suggesting that at least some of the fires may have been kindled for political

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motives. Leftist Synapismos is most closely identified with the anarchist fringe; some question whether the party might have silently encouraged the arsonists -- though there is no factual evidence to support it.

¶13. (C) This is clearly a make-or-break moment for Karamanlis's campaign. Karamanlis's New Democracy is running on its economic and managerial record. How the Karamanlis government responds to a national disaster of this scale will be critical for voters. It is both a risk and an opportunity. This is the largest national disaster that Greece has experienced since the 1999 earthquakes; capable handling of the crisis could potentially work in Karamanlis's favor. As a result, Karamanlis is mobilizing all GOG resources, both to contain the fires and to support those affected. Media report that immediate assistance packages of 2000-3000 Euros are being offered, as well as longer-term assistance (compensation for deaths and loan guarantees to rebuild homes). Formal statements on compensation packages are anticipated from Minister of Economy Alogoskoufis as well as Minister of Public Order Polydoras on August 26.

¶14. (C) Opposition PASOK leader Papandreou is clearly trying to project concern for the nation and avoid the appearance of making political gains from the tragedy. At the same time, his five-minute statement on national television attacked the current government's failures; we expect this will be a continuing theme that will intensify once the immediate crisis is over.

COUNTRYMAN